THE NEGLECTED FESTIVAL

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"Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven." (St. Luke 24:50-51.)

This same scene is recorded also in the first chapter of Acts, verses 9 through 12. These four verses tell us of our Lord being taken up; . . . "and a cloud took him out of their sight." And verses 10 and 11 give us a clear insight into the SECOND COMING: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

The Ascension of our Lord! What a marvellous mystical scene at which to have been present and privileged to witness! It is one of our four great festivals in the Church Year, —Ascension standing with a significance equal to Christmas, Easter, and Whitsunday. There would be no reason for Ascension Day if Christmas and Easter did not precede it, nor would the former ones be complete without Ascension and Whitsunday or Pentecost. They go hand in hand, and one cannot be separated from any of the others. And yet, strangely enough, they have been—tragically so.

Christmas comes, bringing its gift-giving, gaieties, beautiful music, lovely cards and carols — and this is quite proper and definitely as it should be. How better could we

express our joy over the birth of the One Who gave us everything, even Himself? Unfortunately, much commercialism has sapped the real beauty and meaning of our Christmas season.

Easter, the Queen of festivals, does not hold quite the rightful place in our spiritual lives that it should, sad to say, for new dresses and "Easter bonnets," painted eggs and "Easter bunnies" have superseded greatly the glorious Resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Now follows Ascension Day — with what? NOTHING. True, there is a Celebration of the Holy Eucharist which maybe a half-dozen attend, because on the calendar it is a "Church Day." Probably they would be going anyway as from force of habit, since they are accustomed to attend a mid-week Holy Communion.

Down through the centuries, for some unknown reason, this great festival which, in my opinion, ranks equally in greatness with Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, has been sadly neglected, tragically overlooked, and, in short, completely ostracized. This neglect cannot be because it falls on a Thursday — so does Christmas at times. And further, as our Book of Common Prayer states on page li, another name for it is HOLY THURSDAY. Thus we ought to make the distinction between them: that the dav in Holy Week before Good Friday is MAUNDY Thursday, **not** "Holy Thursday." Holy Thursday is the Ascension of our Lord.

If Ascension fell on a Sunday, would it be different? I doubt it. My personal belief is that the reason Ascension Day is neglected is that it is not thoroughly understood. There is indeed a tremendous mystery about Ascension Day. Somehow we may comprehend Christ's birth, although that is equally mysterious. We may comprehend the events of Holy Week and Good Friday. Even the wonder of His Resurrection on Easter Day does not seem to present too great a problem. But when it comes to His parting and going up to heaven in bodily form, and a cloud receiving Him from our sight — this becomes a stumbling block. It is either such a mystery that we are afraid of it, or we do not understand it.Thus we ignore it. In order to "save face," so to speak, we place it on our Church Calendar, have our Eucharistic appointments in white, and acknowledge that it did take place at Bethany. Yet it is best not to press the issue further or ask questions, for this might prove embarrassing. For shame! I would be willing to wager that if the question were asked of any ordinary Sunday morning congregation in any church in the United States, "What is Ascension Day and its significance?" that 75 percent would not know the real meaning of this Holy Day. God forgive us!

Christ, Who died on the Cross and rose again for our justification now on this Ascension Day so many years ago, was going up to receive His reward. It constituted His final or last Resurrection appearance. He was going **home:** back to His Heavenly Father to accept His rightful place on the "right

hand" of God. What rejoicing there must have been in heaven! Very possibly again the same words were reiterated as on the Mount of Transfiguration: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." (St. Matthew 17:5.) As there was rejoicing in heaven, should there not be equal rejoicing here upon earth? Could any event call for a more joyful celebration? Yes, His Spirit had been in Paradise; He had preached to the spirits in prison; and had been again beside the penitent thief who hung on a cross like His own. But now His resurrected body was being taken up into heaven — a body such as yours and mine, which could eat and drink and have the same feelings as we have; yet different, because He could come and go at will through locked doors.

No longer was He subject to material barriers. That is indeed a thrill and wonderment in itself! Is this any less a mystery than the Holy Spirit's overshadowing Mary to make her "great with child," or the coming of that Holy Spirit in those tongues of fire? These also are great mysteries. Any of the miracles — the changing of water into wine at the wedding in Cana, or the raising of Lazarus from the dead, are just as puzzling. However, they are not overlooked because they took place. There are many things we do not understand, nor are we supposed to. We truly "see through a glass darkly." For the present we must be content to "walk by faith and not by sight — by principle and not by feeling." (Fidelius.)

If we accept all these exciting miracles and accelerate with proper celebration all

the other festivals, why cannot we do this for Ascension Day? Whitsunday and its "tongues of fire" are equally mysterious and breath-taking, but we do not "shelve" it because we do not understand it. So, why do we give Ascension Day so little attention?

It is not recorded as to all that was spoken to the disciples on the way to Bethany, or just before Christ ascended. Still, it must have been so clear-cut to their spiritual insight, and to have left such an impact, that they knew He would be with them always — always present although withdrawn from their sight. That was and remains His promise. As He left them with the Great Commission, they knew He would be forever near. Is it any wonder that they returned rejoicing to Jerusalem? Should we do less?

At the end of the day on Good Friday these disciples were downhearted and despondent, for they felt of a certainty this was indeed the end of everything. They had literally "hit bottom." They returned with saddened hearts to their fishing. Then came the glorious appearance of Jesus assuring them of His resurrection. And now, forty days later, His promise "lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (St. Matthew 28:20), left no doubt in their minds but that He would be **here.** Why, therefore, is this great feast-day so blandly received and casually celebrated? Again I say, for shame! Even in this earthly life we welcome home our lads from war with more applause than we do for Him Who has given us everything, even His very life!

Fortunately it is recorded in St. Luke's Gospel 24:52 that they worshipped Him "and returned to Jerusalem with great JOY." Should we do less?

Verse eleven of the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles speaks so clearly of the **Second Coming.** This provides us with another significant reason for keeping Ascension Day always in the foreground. "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Could any promise be clearer? For — when was this promise given? On none other day than ASCENSION DAY! As we wait for that promised time, let us always be looking up; and as we gaze at the clouds keep in mind a saying given us by Dr. Samuel Purvis many years ago: "Blessed be that cloud if God be in it."

Indeed, Ascension Day or Holy Thursday should be a real "Church Day" in every sense of the word. Every man, woman, and child as Christians and Churchpeople ought to attend the blessed Eucharist in church on that day of ancient obligation. Special music, special prayers, in fact special "everything" should be the order of that day. We, too, must be found "gazing up" and worshipping with **joy.**

Maybe some day, somehow, somewhere, someone will catch again the vision of that Ascension, and our Church will restore its rightful emphasis, and give to it due recognition.

Christ's Second Coming after nearly two thousand years has not yet come to pass. Until it does, in God's good time, let all mankind on the face of the whole earth see to it that His Church pays equal due respect to all her feasts and festivals. As she, the Body of Christ, presses forward, let us sing with all our hearts and with one accord:

"See the Conqueror mounts in
triumph;

See the King in royal state,
Riding on the clouds, his chariot,
To his heavenly palace gate!
Hark! the choir of angel voices
Joyful Alleluias sing,
And the portals high are lifted
To receive their heavenly King."

Amen.

* * * *

Further to emphasize the importance of Ascension Day, the Guild is able to present herewith the suggested changes which the Standing Liturgical Commission of the Episcopal Church is recommending for proposed Prayer Book revision.

Ascension Day is retained as at present, except that there is no octave or Ascensiontide; and the next Sunday is to be called the Seventh Sunday in Eastertide. (The As-

cension preface is used from the feast to Whitsun, however.) The collect for Ascension Day is substantially unchanged. The Lessons are: Acts I:1-11 (in place of an Old Testament lesson); Ephesians I:17-23; and Luke 24:49-53. Recommended Psalms for Mass Introit, Gradual, etc. are: 110 and 24:7-10. The Seventh Sunday Collect is: "Almighty God, whose blessed Son our Saviour Jesus Christ ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things; Mercifully give us faith to perceive that according to his promise he abides with his Church on earth, even unto the end of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord, etc." The Psalms proper for this Feast are: 48:8-13 and 47. The Lessons:

A

Acts 1:12-14; I Peter 4:12-19: John 17:1-11a.

B

Acts I:15-26; I John 5:9-15; John 17:11b-19.

C

Acts 7:55-60; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-20;
John 17:20-26.

Incidentally, Pentecost ends Eastertide (in which it is included) without an octave. Trinity Sunday is retained; but the next Sunday is called the Second Sunday after Pentecost.

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